

STATEMENT OF SENATOR TIM JOHNSON

Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
Hearing on

S. 1658, the Wakpa Sica Reconciliation Place Act

May 17, 2000

Mr. Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Members of the Committee, I am pleased to join with my good friend and colleague from South Dakota, Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle, as a cosponsor of the Wakpa Sica Reconciliation Place Act, which will establish the Wakpa Sica Reconciliation Place in Ft. Pierre, South Dakota. The Wakpa Sica Reconciliation Place would be an important cultural and interpretive center, in part to compliment the National Lewis and Clark Trail, but with the unique perspective of the Sioux tribes and the impact of the Lewis and Clark encounter on tribal culture and economics.

During the Lewis and Clark expedition, Captains Merriweather Lewis and William Clark anchored their river boats where the Wakpa Sica, or Bad River, flows into the Missouri. After four months of travel from St. Louis, history was made on September 24, 1804. The next day 44 men landed on the west bank of the Missouri and paraded under the United States flag.

These men then joined Chief Black Buffalo and braves from the Teton Sioux for council in the chief's buffalo skin lodge. This was a key and pivotal meeting between representatives of the great Sioux tribes and those of the United States of America. This meeting was less than amicable.

Throughout the rest of South Dakota's history the relationship between native peoples and non-natives has not been a peaceful one. Today we are still facing the challenging experience of working and living together side by side as evidenced by the United States Commission on Civil Rights recent report on race relations in South Dakota. I am proud of the South Dakotans who have set their differences aside and came together and created the Mni Wiconi water project, as just one example. There is a growing need for a Reconciliation Place.

The Reconciliation Place would occupy the site in which Captains Lewis and Clark, and the members of the tribes came together to meet for the first time--which is a fitting site to bring Indian and non-Indian peoples together. It is my hope that this center will bring people together to learn about the culture and the rich history this area of the United States holds. Through this understanding, it is my hope that we may be able to achieve better relations between Tribal and non-Tribal peoples.

This project is a cultural center which will serve as a home for Sioux law, history, culture and arts for the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota peoples. It will also serve as a repository for Sioux historical documents, which are currently scattered throughout the West. Many Native people do not have access to these documents. With the construction of this facility the native people will be able to house these documents close to home. This will allow interested parties to research their rich past.

The Reconciliation Place will also be the home of the Sioux Nation Supreme Court. This will serve to be a stable legal setting to assist in achieving greater social and economic welfare in Indian Country. Increased legal stability will help promote business investment in the vast human resources that are situated on the reservations in my state. This will bring about more self sufficiency, and less reliance by tribes on the federal government. Similarly, the Native American Economic Development Council will be located in this same facility. This council will assist tribes and tribal members to provide opportunities for economic development. The council will assist in opening the doors to private investment and other resources that are designed to promote development and job creation.

Mr.Chairman, this focal point for Native American culture, law, and economic development assistance is desperately needed. It is apparent that there is a need to strengthen current, and build future understanding between Indian and non-Indian peoples, as well as promote the government-to-government relationship between the tribes and the United States. I urge swift Senate action on this legislation. I would like to thank the Committee for allowing me to testify, and I look forward to working with the Committee in the future on this and other issues.